

**A White Paper on
Comprehensive School Tobacco Policies
Prepared by the
Division of Tobacco Prevention and Control
North Dakota Department of Health
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Introduction

Tobacco kills more than 860 North Dakotans each year. It is the leading cause of preventable death, accounting for more than four times the number of deaths from motor vehicle accidents, suicide, AIDS and homicide combined. Since almost all tobacco users begin use as teens, the school years are a critical time for prevention.

A tobacco-free school environment is essential in achieving physical, mental and social health goals for students, staff, the school and the district. Beyond deterring individual use, comprehensive policies benefit everyone by reducing exposure to secondhand smoke.

Background

North Dakota's youth tobacco use is among the highest in the nation. According to the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, tobacco use rates among North Dakota youth in grades nine through 12 are as follows:

- About 60 percent of students reported they have tried smoking.
- Thirty-seven percent of students smoked a whole cigarette for the first time before the age of 13.
- Thirty percent of students reported they are “current” smokers (smoked within the past 30 days).
- Almost 60 percent of students who smoke indicated that they have tried quitting during the last 12 months.
- Ten percent of students indicated they used smokeless tobacco within the past 30 days.
- Eight percent of students reported they had smoked on school property during the past 30 days.

According to a public education post-survey conducted by Winkelman Consulting in 2004, nearly 97 percent of North Dakotans believe there should be no smoking in school buildings, and 68 percent would extend the ban to include school grounds.

As of March 2005, 80 of 273 school districts in North Dakota reported having a tobacco-free school grounds policy. These policies protect 74 percent of the students in North Dakota.

The Need for Comprehensive School Tobacco Policies

A tobacco-free school policy is recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in their Guidelines for School Programs to Prevent Tobacco Use. They also recommend instruction, curriculum, training, family involvement, tobacco cessation efforts and evaluation to help prevent youth tobacco use.

For schools to effectively prevent and reduce tobacco use among young people, they must create an environment that encourages and reinforces a tobacco-free lifestyle. Clearly articulated school policies, applied fairly and consistently, help students decide not to use tobacco. Policies that prohibit tobacco use on school property, require prevention education and provide access to cessation programs and other positive alternatives, rather than solely institute punitive measures, are most effective in reducing tobacco use among students.

The school tobacco policy recommended by the North Dakota Department of Health, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and the CDC includes:

- 1. Rationale:** Policies should contain a clear statement describing the need for a comprehensive tobacco-free policy. This may include health hazards, secondhand smoke, gateway drug issues, role modeling, etc.
- 2. Content:** Policies should specifically address adults as well as youth, include all forms of tobacco and should apply to off-campus school-sponsored events as well as school grounds, buildings and vehicles.
- 3. Advertising and sponsorship prohibition:** Policies should have language prohibiting tobacco advertising on school property, at school functions and in school publications. This may include gear, paraphernalia, clothing, etc. Policies should also include language prohibiting school acceptance of gifts or funds from the tobacco industry.
- 4. Prevention education:** Policies should include effective tobacco prevention education as an essential component of a strong K-12 program.
- 5. Communication mechanisms:** Policies should be clearly communicated to all relevant audiences including students, staff, parents and visitors.
- 6. Enforcement:** Policies should offer alternatives to suspension for students caught using tobacco. These may include mandatory tobacco awareness sessions or community service.
- 7. Support:** Cessation referral or support should be included as a resource or as part of enforcement.

Conclusion

Decreasing tobacco use in North Dakota requires a comprehensive effort that places emphasis on both youth and adults. A comprehensive effort must include strategies designed to prevent youth from using tobacco, to treat tobacco dependence and to protect children from exposure to tobacco.

A comprehensive school tobacco policy will help change community norms so that children are not bombarded with glorified images of tobacco use, do not witness others using tobacco and are not encouraged to use it themselves. Further, a comprehensive school tobacco policy will help to fulfill a school's mission of offering a safe and healthy environment for learning.